DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 048 CS 207 292

AUTHOR Gere, Anne Ruggles
TITLE Investigating Language Function in Students' Oral Response to Written Composition.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (72nd, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Interaction; Language Role; *Language Usage; *Oral Language; *Peer Evaluation; Peer Groups; Speech Communication; *Student Reaction; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Instruction; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Groups

ABSTRACT

To learn more about the kind of learning that occurs when students read and receive response to their writing, a study was designed to develop an analytical system by which to describe the language of writing groups. Nine writing groups were examined, two from grade 5, four from grade 8, and three from grades 10 through 12. The data collected included 5,000 idea units contained in 36 transcripts of the student writing groups. The idea units in the transcripts were coded for three general functions: directing, informing, and eliciting. Results showed a high percentage of directive function in the language of students. Students directed group procedures with statements such as "Okay, let's get started." They also made directive statements about one another's writing. The informing function was the most common, and like the directing function, it included both writing and the group among its topics. Students informed one another about group procedures and about their writing. Writers not only received considerable information from others in the writing group, they also learned about themselves. The process of reading aloud made writers more aware of their own language. The least frequently occurring function was eliciting. Students used this function primarily to ask questions about procedures or to solicit advice from the group. (A sample coded transcript is appended.) (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED224048

Investigating Language Function in Students' Oral Response to Written Composition

Anne Ruggles Gere

The title of this session "Learning to Write" reminds me that writing is learned rather than taught, that teachers do not so much instruct as they provide situations which help students in their wrestle with words. One such situation is a peer response writing group, an autonomous group of five or so students who listen to one another's writing and make comments on it. My work with such groups convinces me that this combination of oral reading and oral response enables students to learn to write.

Writing groups are not new. Teachers of poetry and fiction have used them for many years, and thanks to the work of Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, and James Moffett, teachers of other forms of writing have begun to see the value of encouraging students to respond to one another's writing. My own initiation to writing groups came as I began directing the Puget Sound Writing Program in 1978. In keeping with the model established by the Bay Area Writing Project, teacher/participants were required to take part in writing groups, and I too joined a writing group, one which has sustained my professional development during the past five years.

Not surprisingly, the teachers who were required to participate in writing groups found it a very valuable experience. Many rated it the most significant part of the summer program. As you know, when teachers feel positive about something they have experienced, they often pass it on to their students. Accordingly, many writing groups have been established in Seattle area classrooms during the past five years. Elementary, junior high, high school, and college students are reading their writing to one another and receiving comments on it.

CS207292

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Anne Ruggles Gere
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

There are many different procedures for writing groups, but the ones followed by teacher participants and handed on to students include these:

1) the writer reads the same selection twice, taking a short break between the two readings.

2) The writer does not comment on or apologize for the selection read.

3) Listeners, who have no copy of the manuscript, make notes between readings and during the second reading but not during the first.

4) After the first reading the listeners write a general impression response which summarizes the meaning of the reading for them. During the second reading the listeners take detailed notes on the language of the selection, noting what they especially like and dislike.

5) Each listener, beginning with the one to the reader's right, offers comments on the selection read, and the writer notes all comments for later reference.

6) The total time available to the writing group is divided by the number of members so that each members has an opportunity to read and receive response.

As you can see, oral language is prominent in these procedures, reflecting the belief that writing is learned not taught. A number of theorists including Lev Vygotsky, Edward Sapir and James Britton argue for speech's importance to thinking and learning. Vygotsky, for example, writes: "Thought and word are not cut from one pattern. . . . Thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech, it finds its reality and form" (p. 126). I think this finding of reality helps students learn.

At first I was merely pleased when writing groups began appearing in classes because I knew they would help students learn to write better.

However, as writing groups continued to flourish and as I read more on the subject, I became curious about the kind of learning they fostered. Existing studies and my own observations assured me that writing groups enable learning, that the revisions which resulted from them showed improved writing, that students in writing groups felt a strong sense of ownership for their prose. But I wanted to know more about what actually occurred when groups of students talked about their writing.

I was particularly interested in the language of writing groups because it struck me that writing groups provide an unusual approach to meaning. As P. F. Strawson explains, conflicting views of the locus of meaning dominate current philosophical thought. One view, that of formal semantics, assumes that meaning is conventionalized in the sentences of a text, that meaning exists independent from function or use. We see a formal semantics view of meaning in reading instructors who assume that meaning resides in the text and emphasize decoding skills such as letter recognition, sound blending and word recognition. The other view of meaning, the communication intention view, holds that meaning is bound to use, that meaning does not reside in sentences alone but in the way sentences are used. The communication intention view appears in reading theorists who assume that meaning exists in the reader as well as in the text and concentrate on the substitutions or miscues students make as they read. The contrast between the two views of meaning is evident in literary criticism as well as reading instruction. A formal semantic view of meaning operates in New Criticism while a communication intention view of meaning guides reader response criticism.

George Dillon has showed how a communication intention definition of meaning has implications for writers. If writers assume that their inscriptions are more like a musical score than a computer program, then they

acknowledge that readers will go beyond what words state explicitly. They recognize that readers will draw inferences, enrich with personal knowledge, and interpret in light of personal belief, values, interests and purposes. The mandate for the writer is to assure that this drawing, enriching and interpreting go in the directions intended by the writer.

Like Dillon, I am concerned with the implications of a communication intention view of meaning for writers. As I have explained elsewhere, the dominant systems of evaluation, systems such as analytical scoring, holistic readings, relative readability or primary trait evaluation ignore the communication intention view of meaning. And I wager that much unsystematized evaluation of writing, the kind we all engage in when we sit down with a stack of papers, likewise gives little attention to a communication intention definition of meaning. Comments scrawled in margins and at the bottom of papers tend to emphasize textual features in the writing rather than the teacher's response to the meanings contained there.

However, writing groups acknowledge a communication intention view of meaning because they portray writing as a transaction between writer and reader much as reading teachers who emphasize miscues acknowledge that meaning lies in the interrelation of reader and text. When students read their work aloud and receive oral comments on it, they see immediately whether the meanings they intended have been perceived, and by receiving comments from several people, they have the opportunity to see different ways their meanings can be apprehended.

Because writing groups provide a relatively unusual kind of learning opportunity for writers, I became interested in understanding more about the kind of learning which occurs when students read and receive response to their writing. I designed a study with four general aims: 1) to develop

an analytical system by which to describe the language of writing groups; 2) to use the analytical system to compare the language of writing groups for students of various ages; 3) to compare oral responses of writing groups with subsequent revisions of writing; 4) to develop more general hypotheses about how writing instruction can incorporate a communication intention definition of meaning. Today I will discuss the first of these aims, the development of an analytical system for describing the language of writing groups and suggest what we can learn from such a system.

The study examined nine writing groups, two from fifth grade, four from grade eight, and three from grade ten through twelve. These were writing groups which had been established for some time so that students were comfortable with procedures, and the teachers had participated in writing groups themselves so they could provide informed support to group members. The data collected included recordings of four group sessions in each class, and the first task was deciding on the form for transcription of these recordings. Because all writing groups were given identical instructions, I had assumed that their procedures would be identical, and that individual comments would occur in a relatively orderly fashion. I was wrong. Even though students had similar introductions to writing groups, they adapted group procedures to their own purposes, and I needed a system for examining the complicated conversations which appeared in transcripts.

Wallace Chafe defines idea units or focuses of consciousness as segments of discourse that coincide with a person's focus of attention. Chafe claims that spontaneous speech is not produced in a flowing stream but in a series of brief spurts. These spurts are the idea units, and I felt that dividing transcripts into idea units would give me a way to examine the interaction of meaning and function since idea units are units of meaning for the speaker.

According to Chafe, the boundaries of idea units are marked by intonation (pitch either rises or falls), by pauses, and by syntax (an idea unit is usually a single clause).

By transcribing writing group proceedings in idea units, I have a good quantitative measure of which aspects of writing receive how much attention, and I can see whether those aspects of writing which receive most focus in the group receive corresponding amounts of attention from the writer during subsequent revisions. More important, because the idea unit is a unit of meaning for the speaker, I have a basis for looking at the interaction and meaning and function in writing group language.

As you can see on the handout, the three general functions for coding idea units are: Directing, Informing and Eliciting.

This coding system provides a great deal of information about the language of writing groups because it gives attention to both function and meaning. Each of the three language functions identified in this system provides a rich source of information on what students say about one another's writing. Perhaps the most unusual features are revealed by the Directing function. A significant number of researchers (Bellack, Cazden, Barnes, Flanders, Shuy, and Sinclair) have examined the language of classrooms and have come to the conclusion that students have access to a limited number of language functions. It is very unusual for students to engage in directive functions such as opening conversation, seeking clarification, requesting, and closing conversation. These functions are reserved almost exclusively for teachers, who say things like "let's discuss the questions on page 22" or "Would you please close the door?" In writing groups I found a high percentage of directive function in the language of students. The topics which occurred in this function included both the group and the writing.

Students directed groups procedures with statements such as "Okay, let's get started." "Go ahead Linda" and "Don't worry about the cube now." They also made directive statements about one another's writing such as "You could switch it around and say the bodies lay." Or "How about saying something like, these boys put on their badges of courage."

The appearance of language with a directing function might be dismissed as mere novelty, but I think there are good reasons to count its appearance as important. With the directing function goes power, and when students give one another advice about writing they do so in the belief that what they say can effect changes. In her examination of the development of language functions among school children, A. K. Markova notes that the linguistic and psychological development of students should include the directing or regulative function, and, according to Markova, when students do not have adequate opportunities to develop the regulative or directing function, they become socially immature, unable to regulate their own behavior or effectively influence that of others. I wonder if the lack of motivation toward writing which we teachers see as procrastination, underdeveloped ideas and careless proofreading has its roots in the social immaturity fostered in many classrooms. Regardless of what power we ascribe to the directive function, it occurs in writing groups and in relatively few other conversations in classrooms.

The informing function is the most common in writing groups and like the directing function, it includes both writing and the group among its topics. Students inform one another about group procedures "Patty read first last time." and about their writing "At the end it was funny." and "The way you use that word blood makes me cringe." My study confirms what other advocates of writing groups have claimed, that peer response

groups give students a tremendous amount of information about their writing, much more than they usually receive in teacher's marginalia or even in a conference because what they receive is information about their writing from four or five other people. While some comments mirror teachers' qualitative remarks such as "that was good" or "that doesn't make sense" and attention to form such as "The last part needs an ending" or "You wrote it the other way around" the majority of comments inform the writer about the content of the writing. Fifth graders tell one another "You didn't put in rumors or anything." and "That part doesn't fit in because there's nothing about it earlier in the story." Eighth graders tell one another "In the beginning you had what they actually said, and you had a lot of discussion between it and we sort of lost interest in the one, two, three, four. Then you went on and said why. It seemed like too much of a stretch." and "I thought that the point was that he didn't kill that animal." and high school juniors say "They could just be scattered bodies" and they participate in overlapping conversations to develop the meaning of a paper on war:

P: But war is caused by a clash between people, between groups of people

M: Right, it's not . . .

P: I mean it didn't start by, you know, a few men getting together . . .

M: Oh yeah

P: And getting angry at each other

M: That's what she's saying

P: It's caused because one, you know . . .

M: Yeah, I know what you mean . . .

P: Section of people disagreed with . . .

M: with another section, well that is what the civil war was . . .

P: with their traits or whatever

M: Yeah

P: How they like their life. I want to know what else you could . . .

M: Okay, since it's the civil war . . .

P: a war caused by . . .

M: well, we'd be biased

P: That's just hard cause no one really know what . . .

At this point the writer interrupts to say "The thing is, I wasn't trying to say whose s'de because there were people from both sides. The conversation continues for several more minutes and at the end the writer has a much clearer idea of what he intends to say anc how what he has already written is perceived by his audience. To return to my earlier point about the locus of meaning, this evaluation has acknowledged a communication intention definition of meaning.

Not only do writers receive considerable information from others, but the writing group provides a forum for self-discovery among writers. The process of reading aloud often makes writers more aware of their own language, and observers' notes in my study include frequent reference to students revising their writing as they read it to the group. In addition, writers make comments about their own writing. Occasionally these become defensive "I did too" or "I told the reasons for and the reasons against" but more often writers explain their intentions to themselves as did the eleventh grader who said "I wasn't trying to say whose side because there were people from both sides" or the eighth grader who says "a lazer gun is supposed to mean he's in the 21st century so he's ahead of his time" or the fifth grader who says "we're supposed to reason why he wants to rent it to the vampire and why he doesn't and I didn't put that." Students who make

comments like these about their own writing are on their way toward understanding that meaning is related to function and are more able to fulfill their responsibilities as writer.

The least frequently occurring language function is Eliciting. Students use this function to ask questions about procedures "Whose turn is it now?" and to solicit advice from the group "I don't know what to do with that. What do you think?" Unlike teachers elicitations "What does this line mean" where students assume that the questioner already knows the answer to the question, the questions in writing groups come from a genuine desire to know. Even though they occur relatively infrequently, I think that these questions are another indication of how writing groups encourage students to consider meaning as they write.

Clearly I have only scratched the surface of findings which result from examining over 5,000 idea units contained in the 36 transcripts of student writing groups. But I hope I have conveyed some of the ways that examining language functions can help us understand the communication intention definition of meaning which pervades writing groups. One of my favorite quotes from research comes from Arthur Applebee's A CHILD'S CONCEPT OF STORY when the investigator asks children about their least favorite stories. Stephen, one child interviewed, identifies SLEEPING BEAUTY as a story he doesn't like, and the interview continues:

R: If you were telling Sleeping Beauty, could you change it so that you would like it?

S: No

R: Why not? Is it alright to make changes in stories?

S: No

R: Do you think you could make it better?

S: No

R: Why not

S: Because you can't rub out the words.

Stephen defines meaning as formal semantics and assumes that such meaning cannot be rubbed out or changed in any way. By contrast, students who participate in writing groups show, in their language, a communication intention definition of meaning. They know that the words which they and others write can be rubbed out.

Investigating Language Function in
Students' Oral Response to Written Composition

Coding System

NCTE November 1982
Anne Ruggles Gere
Department of English GN-30
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195

function categories	topic categories	content categories
D = direct	W = writing	P = procedure: group operations or processes in writing
		f = form: arrangement and conventions of writing
	G = group	C = content: information concerning writing or group
E = elicit		X = context: people, situations, and information outside group and writing, also reference to reading procedure
I = inform		H = phatic: placeholder or emotional contact with no content
		Q = quality: evaluative statements/statments imply judgement, opinion, e.g. "sad story"
		R = response: soliciting information from group
		2 = elaboration: idea unit which adds detail to content of previous one, or which is itself an elaborated statement
		( ) = reflexive: group member comments on own work

Sample Coded Transcript

DCP	R:	I'll go.
ECP	P:	Are you going to read your whole thing or are you going to read your dialogue, or . . .
(IWF)	R:	Well, the thing is, the way that ties in because
(IWF)		the beginning leads up to the dialogue and then there's a conclusion.
(IWF)		So it's real long.
IWP	P:	That's okay.
EWF	M:	Do you have a title?
(IWC)	R:	No, it's just "Civil War Correspondence."
ICP	P:	I don't think anybody has it.
ICH	R:	Okay. (Reads his writing aloud twice)
IWO	M:	That's good.
IWO2	P:	It's long, but good.
EWC		Now, did you say you took some portions out of the book?
EWC2		Some phrases and stuff?
(IWC)	R:	Some phrases--the beginning part--
(IWC)		where the man with the shoe full of blood, one marching.
(IWC)		I could probably leave that out but it's kind of a . . .
IWO	P:	No, it's good.
IWH		I'm just wondering
(IWH)	R:	Yeah, okay.
IWO	P:	Your dialogue I really liked.
IWO2		It just sounds authentic--really authentic.
(IWH)	R:	Okay, um . . .
IWC	P:	One last thing, the pool of blood kind of just doesn't make it.
IWC	M:	Maybe say how these young men would soon lie broken on the field or something . . .
(IWH)	R:	Let's see . . .
IWC	M:	. . . a blood covered field.

References

Barnes, D. Language in the secondary classroom. In D. Barnes, J. Britton and H. Rosen, Language, the learner and the school. Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969.

Bellack, A.A. Kliebard, H.M., Hyman, R.T. and Smith F.L. The language of the classroom. New York: Teachers College Press, 1966.

Britton, J. Language and learning. Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.

Cazden, C., John, V. and Hymes, D. (eds.) Functions of language in the classroom. New York: Teachers College Press, 1972.

Chafe, W. The deployment of consciousness in the production of a narrative. In W. Chafe (Ed.) The pear stories: Cognitive cultural and linguistic aspects of a narrative production. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1980.

Dillon, G.L. Construction texts. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1981.

Elbow, P. Writing without teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Flanders, N. Analyzing teaching behavior. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1970.

Gere, A.R. Written composition: Toward a theory of evaluation. College English, 1980, 42, 44-58.

Halliday, M.A.K. Language as social semiotic. Baltimore, MD: University Park Press, 1978.

Macrorie, K. Telling writing. Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1970.

Markova, A.K. The teaching and mastery of language. White Plains, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1979.

Mehan, H. Learning lessons. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Moffett, J. Teaching the universe of discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

Sapir, E. Culture, language and personality. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961.

Shuy, R. Learning to talk like teachers. Language arts, 1981, 58, 168-174.

Sinclair, J.M. & Coulthard, R.M. Towards an analysis of discourse: The English used by teachers and pupils. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Strawson, P. Meaning and truth. In Logico-linguistic papers. London: Methuen, 1971.

Vygotsky, L.S. Thought and language. (E. Hanfmann & G. Vakar, Eds. and trans.), Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1962. (Originally published, 1934).